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SUBJECT: CG Frankfurt Iftaar Bolsters Ties, U.S. Image

Sensitive but unclassified; not for Internet distribution.

REF: Frankfurt 7398 (notal)

SUMMARY

1. (U) ConGen Frankfurt recently hosted its first Iftaar event (featuring U.S. Army Muslim chaplains) during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan as part of our outreach to the large Muslim community in Post's district. The many guests expressed their gratitude and praised USG efforts to reach out to Muslims, expressing surprise and approval that the USG hosts Iftaars in Washington and around the world. END SUMMARY.

Consulate General Hosts First Iftaar

2. (U) Over sixty guests attended the event, held at Amerika Haus in Frankfurt. Two U.S. Army Muslim chaplains stationed in Germany led the call to prayer, the breaking of the fast, and the prayers that marked the opening of the event. Guests included Turkish business community representatives as well as members of Muslim cultural and religious groups, consular corps representatives from Turkey, Indonesia, Morocco, and Egypt, and German officials working on integration issues. The guests were predominantly male, but a half-dozen Muslim women also attended. Following the prayers, Consulate representatives gave opening remarks including a German translation of President Bush's Ramadan message.

"Germany Has A Lot to Learn From You"

3. (SBU) A leading member of the Islamische Religionsgemeinschaft Hessen (IRH, the largest Muslim organization in the German state of Hessen) told Poloff that the German government could learn a great deal from the United States with regards to Muslim outreach, citing President Bush's annual Iftaar at the White House as an important example of U.S. efforts to reach out to the Muslim community. Another interlocutor called the United States a model of religious freedom since Muslims are allowed to worship freely, despite the events of September 11. Another guest opined that Germans want to reach out to Muslims but feel awkward ("Beruehrungsangst").

"Thanks for Thinking of Us"

4. (U) The overwhelming sentiment from the guests was gratitude for being able to attend an American-sponsored Muslim event. For many, this was the first opportunity to mingle with official Americans. Some remarked that the invitation provided the Muslim community a measure of legitimacy and acceptance that they often do not receive from German society. Guests also noted that since the attacks of September 11, many Muslims in this area feel they are branded as extremists and/or terrorists.

"Muslims in the U.S. Army?"

5. (U) The Iftaar also revealed and countered many participant pre-conceptions about the U.S. (some expressed surprise that Muslims were allowed in the U.S. military, let alone as chaplains). A highlight of the evening was the crowd's response (a combination of awe, surprise, respect, and appreciation) to the chaplains' call to prayer and religious ceremony (all in Arabic). Many commented that this type of event helps build bridges of understanding and cooperation. During the Iftaar meal that followed, the chaplains were treated like rock stars with guests jostling to line up to meet them and be photographed with them. We hope to invite U.S. military imams for future events that involve exchange of ideas on Muslim life in America and related topics. (Note: A number of guests also exchanged contact information with the chaplains, suggesting positive momentum in that community).

Muslim Community Concerns

16. (SBU) The evening also provided insights into the Muslim community's concerns. IRH representatives vented frustration over their inclusion in the latest report by the state Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfV, the German law enforcement organization which tracks domestic extremists), dismissing allegations of fundamentalism and unfair treatment of women as baseless. Other guests expressed unease over a Christian Democratic-led government in Berlin and possible negative repercussions for Muslims throughout Germany. Some painted Christian Democrat (CDU) representatives as distrustful of Muslims and said a "grand coalition" might enact legislation curbing freedom and damaging the integration process. As evidence, they pointed to the CDU-led Hesse government's recent dragnet raids in Muslim neighborhoods (reftel), and the CDU's call for Turkey to become a "privileged partner" in the EU rather than a full member.

COMMENT

17. (U) The success of this event has reinforced and expanded ties with Muslim contacts (several of the group also attended the open house celebration at the new Consulate General building on October 31 a few days later). Guests expressed enthusiasm about making our Iftaar an annual event. END COMMENT.

18. (U) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Berlin.

PASI